

Post-Handover Hong Kong Cinema

Interviews with Stanley Kwan, Herman Yau, and Gordon Chan

The Hong Kong-China coproduction model may have rejuvenated Hong Kong's post-handover film industry, but it also threatens to marginalize some of the region's trademark genres and esteemed filmmakers. Consider the example of veteran directors Stanley Kwan, Herman Yau, and Gordon Chan. Despite demonstrating a versatility of output typical of Hong Kong filmmakers, each of these auteurs is strongly identified with types of subject matter prohibited by Mainland China's state censors.

On the eve of the handover, for instance, Stanley Kwan directed *Yin + Yang: Gender in Chinese Cinema* (1996), a groundbreaking documentary described by Kwan as "my coming-out project." Two years later he exploited the latitude of Hong Kong's ratings system with *Hold You Tight*, a frank exploration of sexual awakening laced with full-frontal nudity, penetrative gay sex, and scenes of male masturbation and gay cruising. The acclaimed homosexual melodrama *Lan Yu*, filmed illegally in Mainland China, followed in 2001.

While Kwan is not exclusively a director of gay subject matter (though one might regard even his 1988 masterwork *Rouge* as a queer text), there is no denying his pioneering contribution to Hong Kong gay cinema. But as Mainland coproductions dominate Hong Kong filmmaking, what are the prospects for LGBT filmmaking under a notoriously repressive political regime – a regime that in 2016 banned depictions of gay people on Mainland television, the better to purge Chinese culture of "vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content"?

If the China coproduction model affords few outlets for Hong Kong queer filmmaking, so too does it preclude the region's singular tradition of exploitation cinema. Herman Yau, despite a varied career, is probably best known as Hong Kong's chief purveyor of so-called Category III movies, his serial-killer drama *The Untold Story* (1993) being a landmark of the genre. (Category III is roughly equivalent to an NC-17 rating in the USA.) Much Category III product revels in bad taste, flaunting images of shocking physical horror and sexual depravity – ingredients vetoed by Mainland China's censors, who remain rigorously opposed to

depictions of horror, the supernatural, and carnality. In the face of such restrictions, the Category III tradition stands out as a peculiarly local institution, a vehicle through which Hong Kong filmmakers may assert local identity. Pang Ho-cheung's iconoclastic comedy *Vulgaria* (2012), for instance, fully embraces the transgressive elements of Category III cinema – sexual taboos, offensive slang, gross-out humor – as if in defiance of Mainland Chinese oppression and encroachment.

Further endangered is Hong Kong's remarkable crime genre tradition, whose murky moral universe runs counter to the Manicheism of Mainland Chinese cinema. In Hong Kong movies, an assassin may be fundamentally virtuous (as in John Woo's *The Killer*, 1989) while a cop may be essentially diabolical (as in *Infernal Affairs*, 2002). Gordon Chan's 1998 thriller *Beast Cops* (co-directed by Dante Lam) centers on police corruption, a subject largely anathema in Mainland films. "The only way that *Beast Cops* could be made in China today," says Chan, "is if the corrupt cops in the story were all from Hong Kong and the good cops from the Mainland." Indeed, this moral binarism is effectively the tactic employed by Johnnie To in *Drug War* (2012), a breakthrough China coproduction granted Mainland theatrical distribution.

In the following interviews, Stanley Kwan, Herman Yau, and Gordon Chan share their views on post-1997 Hong Kong cinema in the context of Mainland coproduction, censorship, and pro-democracy crackdowns.

Stanley Kwan

At present, is it wholly impossible to mount a gay romance story as a Hong Kong-China coproduction?

Well, recently some financiers I know received a response from the China Film Bureau that it would be okay to depict a gay relationship or a lesbian relationship in a Hong Kong-China joint production. However, this message from the Film Bureau was informal; it was not a written message in black and white. In the case of the financiers' project, its depiction of a gay relationship is only acceptable to the Film Bureau because the relationship does not

reflect anything about politics. For example, the script doesn't use a gay relationship to reflect the situation between Hong Kong and China. The Film Bureau is very mindful of such political undertones. Even if the Film Bureau now says that depicting a gay romance is okay, certainly in Mainland China they will still forbid scenes of kissing or nudity. So, even if it turns out that we will be allowed to make gay or lesbian films in Mainland China, the extent to which we can depict homosexuality accurately is still very limited.

It seems to me that Hong Kong, too, has not fully cultivated a market for gay-centered films.

Here is my personal opinion: Among Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan, Hong Kong is supposedly the more civilized, open-minded Chinese territory. But from my observations, Hong Kong is actually the most conservative. For example, *Lan Yu* got a very good response in Taiwan, even at the Taiwanese box office. Even though it's an underground film, somehow the audience saw the film on illegal DVD. But the Hong Kong box office performance was very bad. Some research revealed that romantic couples did not go to the cinema to see *Lan Yu*. But three months later, the DVD release of *Lan Yu* ranked number one in Hong Kong. So people were secretly buying the DVD and watching it at home. At the moment, the theatrical market for gay and lesbian cinema is not there. If I compare Hong Kong and Taiwan, the Taiwan market is more accepting of the homosexual topic. And Taiwan is the first Chinese territory to allow same-sex marriage.

Do you perceive there to be a united community of gay filmmakers in Hong Kong? For example, do you feel any kind of affinity with other gay Hong Kong directors such as Yonfan or Scud?

There is not really a group of gay filmmakers in Hong Kong. You mentioned Yonfan and Scud. Certainly they make films about gay subjects. And for myself, *Lan Yu* is a gay film. But in *Rouge* and *Centre Stage* (1991), the women characters are the most important thing. For me, at least, I don't want to be identified only as a gay filmmaker, because the Mainland China market is there, and my opportunities in China will be limited if I am only seen as a director of gay films. Even if Mainland China is becoming more open-minded, more accepting of gay or lesbian romance films, still there are very limited opportunities for that kind of filmmaking.

You shot *Lan Yu* guerilla style in Mainland China without permission from the government. Did you ever receive censure or punishment from the Chinese authorities once they learned of the film?

Yes, I was blacklisted for two years. After *Lan Yu* won some awards at the Golden Horse Awards in Taipei, there was no newspaper coverage of our success in Mainland China whatsoever. And the two lead actors in *Lan Yu*, Liu Ye and Hu Jun, were summoned to the Film Bureau and told, “Never do it again. Never do this type of film again.” During the two years I was on the blacklist, I prepared a script for a TV series. The producer of the series had some connections in the Mainland government, and he had to work very hard to get me off the blacklist. Finally I was taken off it in 2003. Then I was allowed to direct the TV series in the Mainland.

***Lan Yu* received a Category III rating in Hong Kong. Did the Board of Review demand any cuts or revisions before granting this rating?**

No, no. Nothing at all.

When *Rouge* was released in 1988, critics expressed fear that Hong Kong's cultural identity would be displaced once the impending handover arrived. Today, in the era of China coproductions, critics express much the same concern. Is this anxiety essentially groundless?

I don't think Hong Kong cinema will lose its cultural identity. Sixty-one locally-produced films were made last year. I don't think Hong Kong cinema will die. But certainly the situation now is different. In the early 1980s, Hong Kong directors knew the handover was coming. So we made romantic films, and there was a kind of nostalgic feeling about old Hong Kong in those movies. Certainly this includes *Rouge* in 1988. But now the situation has changed a little bit, because the young Hong Kong directors are saying something about the city *today*, and they are saying it more directly. Look at films like *Ten Years* (2015) and *Trivisa* (2016). The subject of Hong Kong is explored more directly in these films. And it turns out that the Hong Kong audience will come back to the theaters for Hong Kong young cinema.

These recent films more or less directly comment upon the contemporary political situation in Hong Kong. What is your position on the local pro-democracy demonstrations? Are you sympathetic with the protestors?

I think that it is right for the Hong Kong people to speak out. It is right to tell the government their own thoughts. But the way they do it may not be right. I cried when I read the news about the Yellow Revolution, because I think the Hong Kong people should accept others more. They should forgive others more. Why should the situation be like this, where Hong Kongers and Mainlanders are pitted against each other? I think we should show more tenderness. But it seems that the motherland has left the Hong Kong people disappointed.

Conducted in English. 14 April 2017, Hong Kong.

Herman Yau

From *The Untold Story* (1993) and *Taxi Hunter* (1993) to your latest film *The Sleep Curse* (2017), your body of work has been closely identified with Category III filmmaking. Since such exploitation cinema is anathema to the China coproduction model, you have been hailed in some quarters as a stalwart of local filmmaking. Do you view yourself as a local filmmaker?

Generally speaking I won't describe myself that way. Actually, I think I was one of the first Hong Kong filmmakers to make films in the Chinese mainland. As a filmmaker, I think it's not so good to say that I am limited to local filmmaking, because I believe that film is a medium that should reach all mankind. And actually, Category III films haven't always been disallowed in China. The first Category III movie in Hong Kong, *Men Behind the Sun* (1988), was released nationwide in the Chinese mainland without any cuts. Of course, at that time the Chinese government only allowed such a Category III movie to be released in the Mainland because of ideological factors. *Men Behind the Sun* speaks out against the Japanese; it depicts the bad deeds and cruelty committed by the Japanese decades ago in the Chinese mainland. For this reason, the Mainland government decided to permit the movie a theatrical release in

China. In the Chinese mainland, ideology always plays a very important role in deciding whether or not a film can be released in theaters.

Under the present-day Communist regime, though, it seems unlikely that a gory film like *The Sleep Curse* would be granted Mainland distribution.

That's right. From the very beginning, the investors knew that it wouldn't be a film that could be released in the Chinese mainland. Of course, they still hope that it can be released there, because Mainland distribution guarantees financial rewards. But it was never my intention to make a China coproduction or a film that would be allowed into the Mainland market without any difficulty.

How have your films fared with the censors in Hong Kong? Have you ever had to fight for a Category III rating?

Yes. *The Untold Story* and *Ebola Syndrome* (1996) were eventually released as Category III movies, but only after I agreed to remove three or four minutes of footage from each film. For example, in *The Untold Story*, Anthony Wong walks beside eight corpses of the family members he killed the night before. The censors told me to remove this shot, which they described as being too disturbing. In the theatrical version of *The Sleep Curse*, I had to cut four shots from my original version. One of the shots showed Anthony cutting a penis. It's an explicit, graphic shot. The audience can still make out what Anthony is doing, but the very explicit image did not get past the Hong Kong censors.

Do you find that the local censors are generally more stringent on depictions of sexual violence rather than on violence per se?

I think that this issue is the same in the Chinese mainland as in Hong Kong. The censors allow sexual content and they allow violence. What they don't allow – and it's very hard for them to acknowledge this openly – is any kind of contentious ideology or politics. Of course, in Mainland China they are more sensitive about these issues than in Hong Kong. In China, the censors are very sensitive about history. If your film gives a discourse about history, it has to be in line with the Communist Party's version of history. Actually, the China Film Bureau does not state clearly what the censorship criteria are. I think it is to their advantage to have the criteria be unclear. With this ambiguity they can redefine the criteria from time to time according to the social and political climate. The censorship system in the Chinese mainland

is sometimes quite loose and sometimes quite tight. In either case, it stems from the government's reaction to the political climate and the social reality.

Some critics argue that post-handover Hong Kong cinema is on the brink, especially as China coproductions become the dominant mode of production. Do you share this view?

Hong Kong cinema will never die; it won't come to an end. First of all, when we say that the character or the identity of Hong Kong cinema is being lost, what are we talking about? What is the identity of Hong Kong cinema? It was never well defined. The so-called Hong Kong New Wave in the late-1970s and early-1980s developed a kind of realism. Before that, there was the so-called studio system. The setting and location of these studio films looked so fake, but the audience at that time didn't say these films were not good. So the aesthetics and the tastes of the audience change as time goes by. I think the identity of Hong Kong cinema is not constant. It's mobile. It changes over time. Secondly, how do you define the death of Hong Kong cinema? If there are only five local productions a year, has Hong Kong cinema died? Or if there are no productions, is this the death of the local industry? You can't say that. A few years ago, people said that Taiwan cinema was dying, but now it is having a renaissance.

Are you tempted to follow some of your peers and set up base in Mainland China?

Those who went to the north went there to make money, because they were no longer making any money in Hong Kong. But, if you will permit me to be proud for a moment, I would say that I have made a lot of money in Hong Kong. I can still earn a very good living here. I can still make movies in Hong Kong. Why should I bother going to the north? Of course, some filmmakers want big money and so they head north. They want big budgets. But I know that by making Category III films like *The Sleep Curse* I am forfeiting the Mainland market, and that I must therefore compromise on the production budget. The budget on *The Sleep Curse* was about HK \$ 11 million. Compared to a lot of coproductions that is a very small budget. But I accept that. To go north or to stay in Hong Kong: it depends on how you want to live.

So you don't need China; you can operate perfectly well in Hong Kong?

Well, I won't say perfectly! But I can still survive.

Conducted in English. 12 April 2017, Hong Kong.

Gordon Chan

You are one of several Hong Kong directors, including Tsui Hark and Peter Chan, to decamp to Mainland China and work consistently on Hong Kong-China coproductions in recent years. Would you say that Hong Kong filmmakers have transformed Mainland Chinese filmmaking in important ways?

I think we have brought a higher level of professionalism to the Mainland film industry. Hong Kong filmmakers have always been very concerned with the efficiency of the crew. We would never stop shooting; whenever we *had* to stop shooting, we would get nervous: “Why the hell are we stopping?” But it is not that way at all in China. China has a strong tradition of art filmmaking. They treat filmmaking as an art. When the Mainland directors want to work, they work; when they want to slow down, they slow down – whereas Hong Kong filmmakers are always like sergeants on the battlefield yelling, “Go, go, go!” This is the biggest difference. Our planning and organization is much more detailed, and I think that has really influenced Mainland filmmaking. The Mainlanders have learned a lot from the way we plan and organize the whole team into a bunch of professionals really pushing forward. Nowadays many Chinese directors would rather employ a Hong Kong assistant director than a Mainland one, because they prefer to organize things the Hong Kong way. Chinese filmmakers need to be a lot more efficient nowadays, because the budgets of coproductions are getting higher and higher. They work much faster now than they did twenty years ago. On the whole, I would say that Hong Kong and Mainland filmmakers have influenced each other. Mainland China had a very good tradition of old studio filmmaking. And I actually learned quite a lot from them, especially when building sets and shooting on studio stages.

How have the industrial developments since 1997 affected the way you make films?

One drastic change is the shooting environment in Hong Kong. Before 1997, Hong Kong filmmakers were like a bunch of hawkers running around on the street, being chased by policemen because we had no legal license to shoot on location. Back then, it was impossible to get a license to do anything. Pyrotechnics were illegal, although we used them anyway.

After 1997 the government made a lot of effort to support local filmmaking, for example by establishing the Hong Kong Film Development Council. Now we have a law on pyrotechnics; now we have legal ways of shooting on location, and the police help us by stopping the traffic and so on. It's a lot easier nowadays to shoot a film in Hong Kong. But I don't know: Sometimes I really appreciate the old way we shot films. There was an energy and excitement to the way we made films back then, and I think all that energy found its way into our films. Today, the industry has built a very good infrastructure that allows filmmakers to shoot legally and safely in Hong Kong. But I think some of the energy has been lost.

Despite the industrial advances in Hong Kong, you have chosen to direct Mainland joint ventures in recent years. What is your primary incentive for embracing the coproduction model?

When I entered the Hong Kong film industry in the mid-1980s, domestic films owned 70% of the local market. Most of the audience would go to see Hong Kong films. But today local films claim around 10% of the market. Nowadays, most of the audience goes to see Hollywood films. Tsui Hark, Peter Chan, and I – we are some of the few directors that can make big productions in China that can compete with Hollywood and fight for a major share of the market. In Hong Kong, we cannot do that; it isn't possible to make big-budget blockbuster films here, because the industry is too small. Nevertheless, our market is still failing despite our efforts in China. We are still losing to Hollywood. I don't see us winning this battle at all. But we need to keep on fighting.

What has been your experience with the Mainland censors?

I think that censorship in China has improved a lot. In 2008 I directed *Painted Skin*, which was the first ghost film made in China for twenty years. I had a lot of discussions with the China Film Bureau. I told them, "You don't need to be so tight with censorship. You've already released *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) in the Mainland. Why don't you let us make *Painted Skin*? We are only asking to make the kind of movie that you have already been importing from Hollywood, so you should let us do it. Otherwise, you don't have your own industry." And actually, this is what the censors are doing now – they are relaxing in a lot of ways. But then again, they are not relaxing quickly enough. They should let us make these films before it is too late. Let us do it before there are no more Chinese or Hong Kong filmmakers really influencing the market. I wish Chinese censorship was like it is in Hong

Kong. Hong Kong is free in a lot of ways, and we can mostly shoot whatever we want to shoot.

Where do you stand on the political conflicts between Hong Kong and China? Do you think the uprising of Hong Kong localism has been beneficial for Hong Kong film?

There is nothing wrong with people asking for democracy, but I was against the Occupy movement because I think it is illegal. I don't think we need that kind of action to prove we need democracy. We have been marching for democracy for years. We did all our protests legally, and we remain very proud of our peace movements. The Occupy movement actually introduced a lot of violence from both sides. It wasn't a good move. But we need democracy, and I do think China needs democracy too. As for Hong Kong films, I do wish that the new filmmakers would look beyond the local. For a long time, people have been yelling, "Hong Kong films for Hong Kong people!" But cinema doesn't evolve this way. No good films are made only for certain people. All good films are for everybody. Instead of making films that only young Hong Kongers or Cantonese speakers will understand, we should make films for the world.

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